DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 965 PS 022 798

AUTHOR Hook, Jim; Shaeffer, Peggy
TITLE Wyoming Kindergartens: Past, Present, and Future. Wyoming Center for Educational Research Report Series 1993, No. 4.
INSTITUTION Wyoming Univ., Laramie. Wyoming Center for Educational Research.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 34p.
AVAILABLE FROM Wyoming Center for Educational Research, P.O. Box 3374, Laramie, WY 82071 ($6).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Evaluation; Early Experience; *Educational History; Educational Policy; *Educational Trends; *Kindergarten; Kindergarten Children; Primary Education; Prior Learning; School Entrance Age; School Readiness; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Developmentally Appropriate Programs; University of Wyoming; *Wyoming

ABSTRACT

This report reviews the history of kindergartens in America and in the state of Wyoming, and examines current trends and future directions of kindergarten programs. Wyoming's first kindergarten was established in Sundance in 1891-92. The University of Wyoming began offering courses in kindergarten theory by the mid 1940s, and the kindergarten became a regular part of the state's K-12 programs by the mid 1970s. Today's academic focus in many kindergarten curricula, which seems to have begun in the early 1980s and continues as a national trend, creates for kindergarten teachers a conflict between what they believe to be best practice and what they are actually expected to do in the classroom. Kindergarten teachers are beginning to question the use of screening instruments prior to kindergarten entrance, the lowering of school entry age, the implementation of kindergarten teaching strategies more suitable for older children, and the practices of retaining kindergarten children or placing them in extra-year programs. Opportunities for spontaneous play in rich environments are becoming a standard in many kindergartens. Districts across the state are carefully examining present kindergarten practices and developing appropriate practices based on historical and empirical research. An integrated curriculum, making connections with previous learning, multi-age grouping, and alternative assessment are keys in re-designing curriculum for young children. Notes contain 23 references. (AP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 376 965

Wyoming Center for Educational Research

College of Education

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING
Laramie, Wyoming

PS 022798

PS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Wyoming Kindergartens Past, Present, and Future

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Debbie Martinez

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The New Generation of American Schools

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Those interested in obtaining copies of this report or other titles in this series may do so by writing to:

Debbie Martinez
Report Series Assistant Editor
Senior Administrative Secretary
Wyoming Center for Educational Research
College of Education
The University of Wyoming
Laramie, Wyoming 82071

Dr. Barbara Hakes
Director and Series Editor
Wyoming Center for Educational Research
College of Education
The University of Wyoming
Laramie, Wyoming 82071
Phone: (307)766-3146
Fax: (307) 766-6668

Cover Design: Andrew Bryson
Instructional Media Coordinator
College of Education
The University of Wyoming

Editorial Board

UW, College of Education

Mary Alice Bruce; Assistant Professor, Ed. Psych & Counseling
Norma Collins; Assistant Professor, Secondary Education
Rick Shade; Assistant Professor, Special Education
D.J. Yocom; Assistant Professor, Special Education

The Wyoming Center for Educational Research Report Series is made possible through research conducted by College of Education faculty and faculty in other colleges, in collaboration with the Wyoming School/University Partnership program.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Wyoming Kindergartens
Past, Present, and Future

By
Dr. Jim Hook
Dr. Peggy Shaeffer

Wyoming Center for Educational Research
College of Education
The University of Wyoming
Report Series 1993 - No. 4

Jim Hook is a Professor at the University of Wyoming, College of Education, Division of Leadership and Human Development.

Peggy Shaeffer is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wyoming, College of Education, Division of Lifelong Learning and Instruction.

I. Origin of Kindergartens

From a historical perspective Friedreich Froebel is credited with establishing the first kindergarten in about 1840 in Blankenburg, Germany. Froebel's thesis was that a child's education should begin during the early years when the individual was considered to be "waxing" in interest and development. The chief feature of Froebel's kindergarten was "organized play." Children were provided curricular opportunities for "instructive diversions and healthful games." He held a deep conviction that age five was the appropriate time to begin deliberate education. The "Garden of Children", as Froebel referred to his kindergarten, was so popular that within 25 years of its origin it flourished in the major cities of Europe before making its way in 1873 to St. Louis, Missouri. By 1874, Philadelphia had also established a demonstration kindergarten.

America's educators became intrigued with the kindergarten as early as 1873.

The St. Louis and Philadelphia demonstrations convinced American educators that the kindergarten should become an integral part of the public school. The two programs followed the basic tenets of Froebel's school in Germany, emphasizing pupil self-generated activities and social participation in group experiences.

Within a decade of the St. Louis demonstration project, kindergartens had been

established in most of America's major cities. Granted, many were still simplistic ventures, but the idea had caught the attention of American educators.

Currently the kindergarten is a fundamental component of the American public school system, with virtually all school districts across the country participating in kindergarten education.

II. Kindergartens in Wyoming

Wyoming's history reflects a commitment to the kindergarten that can be traced to the mid 1800's. The first public kindergarten in Wyoming was established in Sundance during the 1891-92 school year. The Superintendent's Biennium Report of 1890-92 confirmed this claim.[1] According to Strouf, there is no evidence that the program continued to exist in subsequent years since no records of kindergartens in Sundance were available until the 1950's.[2]

Both Carbon County and Natrona County supported the notion of kindergarten with programs that were initiated during the 1890's. Records of the history of Carbon County Schools reveal that Rawlins established a free public kindergarten in 1894.[3] The Board of Education in Rawlins appropriated $700 to fund the program through 1895. Natrona County records report that

kindergarten methods were being successfully used in that county's schools as early as 1892.[4]

Wyoming's first kindergarten was established in Sundance in 1891-92.

The State Teacher's Association formed in 1891 advanced the cause of education at all levels in the state's schools. In 1894 during its third annual meeting, Dr. E. Stuver, Chair of the Teacher's Association School Law Committee, read a paper, Relation of Kindergarten to Public Schools which emphasized the benefits of kindergarten programs in the schools and pointed out that the expenses of offering such programs were well worth the taxpayer's costs.[5]

As a result of Dr. Stuver's efforts, the Association adopted a resolution recommending that all schools in the state establish "free kindergartens wherever possible as a part of the regular work of the school".[6]

Permissive legislation for the establishment of free public kindergartens was adopted by the Wyoming Legislature in 1895. The legislation provided that the board of trustees of any district, "Shall have the power to establish and maintain a kindergarten system of instruction in the schools".[7]

By 1917 there were kindergarten programs in Carbon, Converse, Fremont, Goshen, Hot Springs, Lincoln, and Sweetwater counties according to the Biennial Report of the

Superintendent of Public Instruction 1917-1918.[8] However, by 1931 only 9 percent of the children of kindergarten age in Wyoming were enrolled in programs. The State Board of Education encouraged school boards to consider establishing kindergartens reporting that the programs, "Pay for themselves in actual dollars and cents."[9]

The 1930 President's White House Conference of Child Health and Protection supported the nationwide public school kindergarten movement. The conferees strongly recommended that school districts throughout the nation establish kindergarten programs.

The University of Wyoming began offering courses in kindergarten theory by the mid 1940's.

By the mid 1940's there was a marked increase in kindergarten enrollment in the state's public schools. The University of Wyoming began offering course work in kindergarten theory and observation in 1946-47 and again in 1948-49. The University Bulletin reported that perspective elementary teachers could specialize in teaching kindergarten, (5) primary grades (1-3) or intermediate grades (4-6).[10]

As late as 1950 only about 15 percent of Wyoming's eligible children were attending kindergarten. Distance and sparse population in rural areas presented real problems for program implementation. Innovative approaches for enrolling pupils in rural areas included brief spring

kindergartens, all-day every other day kindergartens, and riding the bus to school in the a.m. and having parents pick kindergartners up at noon. Another dilemma facing school districts was employing qualified teachers for kindergarten instruction. This was not only a concern for Wyoming schools but also for schools across the nation.

The curriculum for Wyoming kindergarten programs emphasized socialization of pupils and readiness activities. Readiness activities focused on instruction in language, numbers, literature, and poetry. Teacher guides specifically suggested that programs should include "reading readiness," preparation for reading. The guides were explicit in discouraging formal reading instruction.

By the mid 1970's the kindergarten had become a regular part of the state's K-12 programs.

Model kindergarten programs were begun in Casper, Cheyenne, Newcastle, Rawlins, Rock Springs, and Sheridan in 1967.[11] The programs were designed to employ the best ideas, curriculum, materials, and equipment for kindergarten age children. Summer workshops on the University of Wyoming campus and teacher conferences to develop a handbook for educators were held. A Handbook for Kindergarten was published by the Wyoming Department of Education in 1972. The handbook contained information about the developmental characteristics of five-year-olds, a model program which included language arts,

music, numbers and other, "growth promoting," activities. A suggested typical day's activities was also outlined. The publication was widely distributed throughout the state. By the mid 1970's, kindergartens had become a regular feature in the state's school districts.

III. Kindergarten Today

With the appearance of A Nation at Risk, A Nation Prepared, Time for Results and other publications during the early 1980's decrying the sorry state of American education and the public schools, the very nature of the kindergarten began to evolve into a far different entity from that of its original visionaries.

National Trends. Until quite recently, kindergartens were protected from the pressures that were being felt throughout the rest of the educational continuum. As the call for higher educational standards became our national education theme, the kindergarten fell victim to increased pressure to become more academic. The kindergartens that most adults fondly remember with naps, cookies, and play quickly fell out of favor during the 1980's. Once a haven that was designed to support the child in his/her transition to school, kindergartens have become sweatshops, intent on producing young children that can meet the challenges of first grade. Academics are now

the major focus of many kindergartens. It is not unusual to observe five year old children being subjected to standardized tests, pencil and paper exercises, large group instruction, and content area teaching. These kindergarten practices are reflections of policy trends that are affecting all levels of education. A review of the literature suggests that several recurring trends can be identified that are having this affect on programs. These include:

- o Refocusing of kindergarten curriculum from activities that are developmentally appropriate to more academic work;
- o Issues related to school entry age and readiness for school;
- o Screening prior to school entrance to determine readiness, and,
- o Retention in kindergarten.[12,13]

Unfortunately, academics are currently the major focus in many kindergartens.

In order to better understand the impact of these trends, each will be discussed individually.

Academic focus in kindergarten curriculum. The call for increased standards across the educational experience has had a profound impact

on kindergarten. What was formerly reserved for first grade is now expected in the kindergarten curriculum. Referred to as an escalated curriculum, academics has taken a firm grip on kindergartens. Teachers in kindergarten may recognize the inappropriateness of such a movement but feel that they have no choice but to follow the lead. In a recent study in Oregon, a survey of kindergarten teachers indicated that there was a clear conflict between what they believed to be the best practices for teaching young children and what they were actually doing in the classroom.[14] When asked to identify WHY they continued to teach in ways that were in direct conflict with their philosophical beliefs about children, they responded that pressure from administration, parents and other teachers in the system left them with little choice but to comply. If the very professionals who KNOW better are perpetuating inappropriate practices in the teaching of young children, there is little wonder that the move toward more developmentally appropriate practices is a difficult one to achieve, at best.

School entry age. Typically, the age for kindergarten entrance is five years of age. The actual date that the child turns five is at issue. In 1968, the dates of choice were December 1 or January 1.[15] Today, the typical cut-off date is September 15 with more and more states considering moving the date back to March 15.

This shift in the date by which children must turn five has been influenced by the belief that the child's age has been one of the primary contributing factors in kindergarten failure. In a round about way, this may be true, but not solely because of the child's age. The match between the child's age and the teaching strategies used in the classroom is of real importance. In any typical group of 5-year olds, there will usually be a developmental age range of about two years.

Surveys of kindergarten teachers indicate that there is a clear conflict between what they believe to be the best practices and what they are actually expected to do in the classroom.

Teaching strategies that are more and more frequently being implemented in kindergarten are drawn from what is happening in the upper elementary grades. Apparently, the assumption is that if we are teaching with more of an academic focus in our kindergarten, we must employ strategies that are used in teaching academics to older children. This usually implies that children are exposed to large group instruction, with tasks surrounding content areas being assessed through pencil and paper tasks. Clearly, this would prove to be difficult, if not impossible, for a child who, according to Piagetian philosophy, is problem operating in the preoperational stage of cognitive development. We know that children at this level require hands-on, active exploratory learning--the antithesis of the practices being implemented. Our assumption, therefore, that the children are failing because they are "too young" for the task may be absolutely true.

The logical solution to this problem might seem to be to change the cut-off date. That way children attending kindergarten are older and we could minimize if not eliminate this problem of "youngness". With a little more thinking, however, the error of this type of move becomes clear. While in fact the problem may be temporarily solved, we will ALWAYS have a youngest child in a class. The move, for example, from a September 15th cut-off date to a March 15th cut-off date (as recommended for the State of South Dakota in March of 1990) would simply result in those children with January, February, and March birthdays replacing the children with June, July, and August birthdays as the youngest in the class. Research suggests that the curriculum issue may be resolved for a brief time, but that within two and one half years, the adjustments made for the older, more "capable" children are lost, and we again begin to fail children who are "young". The practice of holding "immature" children from entering the kindergarten until age six actually increases the chronological age range in the class. The oldest child may be nearly 30 percent older than the youngest entering kindergarten.

Every month in the life of a young child is critical for development.

Every month in the life of a young child is critical for development. The trend to change the birth date to accommodate the child's lack of success in school, simply is a band-aid approach. The truth of the matter is that the trend does little

to nothing to support the child and, in fact, exacerbates the problem by contributing to the escalation of the curriculum. This practice may in fact be detrimental to the child's personal and social development.

Screening prior to kindergarten. The recognition that children were failing at a rapid rate in kindergarten moved professionals to closely re-examine present practices. It appeared that one way to remediate the problem was to identify those children who would be at high risk for failing in kindergarten. As a result, the 1980's witnessed a trend in screening children prior to kindergarten in an effort to prevent future academic failure. At first glance, this might seem like a sound idea.

A myriad of measures have been used for this purpose. The tool of choice in most instances is the Gesell Screening Inventory. Throughout the 1980's, training programs in the administration and interpretation of the Gesell Inventory burgeoned around the nation. Proponents of identifying children who might be at risk because of their developmental level, referred to the "gift of time" as being the solution to the high rates of children failing in kindergarten. The Gesell Screening Inventory IS NOT a valid or reliable predictor of children's future academic success.[16] At best, it is a reasonable measure of where the child is presently performing and could possibly be used to facilitate

curriculum development. Under no circumstances should it be used to determine whether a child should be allowed to enter school. In fact, the use of the tool to recommend alternative programming is also at issue. Unfortunately, it continues to be used for just that purpose. Districts around the country rely on the information gleaned from the Gesell to make long term decisions about a child's academic programming. While several who do use the Gesell claim that it is just one of several measures that are used, it is educationally unsound to suggest that ANY screening or assessment be used to hold a child out of school for one year, or perhaps enter into an alternative program.

The use of screening instruments prior to kindergarten entrance is a critical issue.

In practice, that is just what research indicates happens when a screening instrument is used prior to kindergarten. Children who are identified "delayed" or perhaps at risk for academic failure for any other reason, will more than likely not be recommended for kindergarten. Instead, it may be suggested that the child stay at home for an extra year. For some children, this may be just the opposite of what they need. The home environment may not be providing the youngster with rich experiences that would serve as the base for school success. Program options, such as a preschool or developmental kindergarten, may be presented but these simply add an additional year to the child's education experience and there is no guarantee that they will be quality experiences. In either situation,

however, the result is the same. The youngster does not attend kindergarten.

What impact does this have on the kindergarten? If the practice continues over a period of time and if the recommendation consistently is headed for parents to keep their children out of kindergarten until they are "older and hence more ready," the average age of the kindergarten population is going to increase. Admittedly, with increased age may come maturation and with maturation the child's ability to perform on more academic type problems may increase. The curriculum of the school changes to meet the skills of these incoming "older" kindergartners and the cycle intensifies. A whole new group of children, more than likely those children who are legitimately in kindergarten by their chronological age, will begin to experience failure. The purpose of screening has been lost and the practice has only contributed to the dilemma facing schools today.

The educational purposes of screening have been lost.

Retention in kindergarten. The escalation of the curriculum and the use of screening tests has added to the problem of retention of children in the primary grades. The notion of FAILING kindergarten seems preposterous for most professionals, but the reality of the practice is evident. Shepard and Smith report that in some school districts, the retention rate for kindergartners

reaches as high as 60%.[17] Throughout the research on retention, there are insufficient data to suggest that the practice is positive.[18,19,20] The myth is perpetuated, however, that if a child IS going to be retained, the YOUNGER the child is, the better. As a result, and perhaps reflecting the beliefs of teachers that retention MAY NOT be positive, a system has developed to soften the concept. For the past twenty years, extra year programs have proliferated in our schools. Referred to by a variety of names, depending primarily on when the extra year is implemented, these programs are nothing more than glorified retention practices. Developmental kindergartens are typical names for programs for children not ready for kindergarten and transition rooms or transition first grades are labels for rooms for children who have attended kindergarten but are not ready for first grade. Despite their names, despite the attempts at receiving the support of parents and despite the practice of "preparing" children so that the harmful effects of retention will not be realized, children know when they have been retained.

IV. Wyoming's Kindergartens Today

How do all of these trends reveal themselves in Wyoming? Descriptions about the remoteness of Wyoming are common and are supported through our exposure in national periodicals. Indeed, it is common for academia to refer to Wyoming as the

Despite the attempt to soften the concept of retention practices, children know when they have been retained.

last "frontier" when writing federal grants. It might be assumed, therefore, that we are somewhat immune to the educational trends that are permeating the rest of the country. In fact, such is not the case. Capturing the spotlight several decades ago, kindergarten education has been a fundamental component of the public schools in Wyoming for many years. Educators in Wyoming take great pride in their educational system and as changes in schools sweep across the country, so, too, do they change in Wyoming. The Wyoming Association of Elementary School Principals designated 1991-92 as the year to focus on early childhood programs in their schools. Their enthusiasm and support has resulted in the development of some innovative programs and certainly has raised early childhood to new levels of attention in the public school. Over the past two and one half years, two education professors at the University of Wyoming have been studying the status of early childhood programs in the public schools of the state. Through surveys, interviews, and site based observations it has become clear that current practices in early childhood education in our public schools reflect the trends that we are observing at the national level. All of Wyoming's 49 school districts offer kindergarten programs. The majority, 69 percent, have half-day classes. Some 30 percent, rural and sparsely populated areas, offer full-day, every other day programs. Three districts operate all day every day

kindergartens as pilot projects or for special populations but no district reported having a full day kindergarten, every day, available for all children. Fourteen percent have summer kindergarten programs. Each of the trends mentioned earlier will be discussed as they are reflected in Wyoming practices.

Academic focus in kindergarten curriculum. Do Wyoming kindergartens reflect more of an academic or developmental perspective? The answer to the question is found not in what those surveyed said, but more in what they didn't say. In surveying, interviewing, and observing in kindergartens throughout Wyoming, it becomes clear that while educators and administrators may be aware of the inappropriateness of forcing too much, too soon on the young learner, the focus of large numbers of programs is academic in nature. While this may not be articulated by the participants, it becomes clear when those interviewed were asked to describe the difference that existed between their "traditional" kindergarten and any extra year programs (such as transitional first grade or developmental kindergarten). Time and time again, the respondents referred to the extra year programs as being much less academic, and more hands on in nature. The extra year programs were described as being more child centered, with smaller teacher/child ratios. Field trips and real life experiences play a major role in the curriculum of

In most cases "extra" year programs do not have the intended beneficial effect on children's development.

these programs. Whole language, learning centers, and small group or individual instruction as compared to large group instruction were described as the norm. What does this tell us? The nature of the curriculum in the traditional kindergartens has become more academic. Respondents described the emphasis on preparing the child to succeed in first grade as a force in their curriculum. Mention of worksheets, large group instruction, and concern for the numbers of children that weren't ready to move on to first grade are evidence of the shift toward more academic programs.

School entrance age and readiness: screening prior to school entrance. While there was some mention during a recent legislative session regarding the entrance age for children to enter public schools, there has not been an organized effort of late to move our entrance date. This is more than likely due in large part to Wyoming's strong support of local control in matters of school decisions. Presently, Wyoming follows the national trend toward a September 15 cut-off date for youngsters to enter kindergarten. There are reports that parents have been encouraged to not have their child begin school, even though the child was of "legal" age because of the child's performance on a preschool/kindergarten screening (Personal conversation and school reports). Screening prior to kindergarten, however, has taken hold in a significant number of districts in the state. Of the

state's 49 school districts, 47% indicated that screening of prekindergarten or pre-first grade students is recommended or required. In keeping with national trends, the Gesell Screening Inventory is the most commonly used tool. Also employed for screening and placement purposes are district developed tests and the Dial-R. Information gleaned from these processes, in addition to teacher observation/recommendations are used when making placement decisions about children. An interesting trend that began to emerge from the University of Wyoming researchers' data was the fact that teachers were beginning to question their application of not only the Gesell, but the entire idea of screening at all. Comments such as "we used to...," or "we are thinking about not conducting our screening this spring," were recorded. This re-consideration of present practices may indicate a shift in the development and implementation of more developmentally appropriate practices.

Wyoming's kindergarten teachers are beginning to question the idea of screening children prior to school placement.

Retention in kindergarten. Unfortunately in our nation's stampede to restructure education, schools have fallen victim to the phenomenon of "holding back" or retaining for a second year students who have not met "the criteria" for promotion. Retention rates appear to be on the rise, often in the primary grades. As Shepard and Smith report, 60% of kindergartners, may be retained in any given year.[21]

While retention in kindergarten may not be the term of choice, the University of Wyoming survey indicated that at least 47% of the districts did, in fact, practice retention in one form or another. Special programs that were originally designed to prevent children from future failure are fairly common. Called several names, (i.e. developmental kindergarten, transition rooms, transition first, or junior first grades), these programs are in reality simply another form of retention. An update of the original survey of Wyoming's kindergarten practices shows that 43 percent, 21 districts, have "transitional," special placement classes for children who have completed kindergarten but who are not ready for first grade. One district having transitional classes indicated that this would probably be the last year they employ this philosophy. A majority of the districts having transitional classes stated that teacher assessment was a key factor in placement. It was interesting to note several districts still use the Gesell Scale and fewer use other formal assessment tools for placement.

When asked, teachers stated that the major reasons for retaining kindergartners for a second year were immaturity, lack of academic performance, poor work habits and motivation or not completing district criteria for promotion to first grade.[22] What is striking about these programs is the curriculum that apparently is being implemented

in them.

Opportunities for spontaneous play in rich environments is becoming a standard in many kindergartens.

Reports from school districts state the curricula for the extra year programs focus on developmentally appropriate practices. Activities include many opportunities for spontaneous play in environments which allow for building, listening, painting, dramatic play, blocks, puzzles and other "hands-on" activities. Developmentally appropriate practice means matching what we know about how young children develop with content. It means dealing with children as individuals, not just as groups. It means understanding children's changing and developing capacities and that all children can learn.

V. Future Directions.

Based on the University of Wyoming researchers' data, Wyoming's experiences with early education in the public schools are not that different from the trends that we are witnessing around the nation. The attention that early childhood is receiving at a national level is also being observed in our state. Despite the negative trends just described, there is a great deal of evidence that districts across the state are carefully examining their present practices and moving towards a different way of teaching the young child typically in kindergarten through grade three. For

example, several districts either already have in place or are beginning to examine the possibility of implementing multi-age classrooms in the primary grades.

Districts across the state are carefully examining their present practices of kindergarten education.

Variability within groups of kindergarten children is normal. In typical groups of 5-year olds, the developmental range may be as much as two years. Multi-age groupings may be a promising alternative to the traditional age-grade grouping patterns. Thirty percent of Wyoming's school districts have adopted, or are experimenting with multi-age grouping configurations. Several districts include K-1; K-1-2; or K-1-2-3 patterns. Of the 34 districts not employing multi-age groupings, eight stated that they were exploring possibilities of piloting multi-age grouping in the next few years. The major concern about the physical regrouping of children is that simply by mixing age groups we are not guaranteed that the child will be receiving an appropriate education. Quite simply, it is not the grouping of the children, but the actual curriculum that is being implemented and, perhaps more importantly, HOW that curriculum is being implemented that will ensure quality programs for young children.

Quality early childhood programs, those that truly reflect the spirit and intent of developmentally appropriate practices, are not achieved overnight. They require careful planning and time; time for

faculty and administrators to become familiar with a new philosophy, time for parents and communities to understand and appreciate a new way of teaching children, time for philosophical and physical changes to occur so as to create the best possible learning environments for young children.

Just what are developmentally appropriate practices? How can an observer tell if they are being implemented in the school? How can teachers and administrators "verify" that they are truly developing programs that are designed to meet the unique needs of young children?

Much has been written since 1986 when the National Association for the Education of Young Children first proposed its position statement on developmentally appropriate practices for the education of young children from birth through age seven. Numerous professional organizations, National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) have endorsed the original paper or developed similar statements of their own.[23,24] A common thread that holds the various positions together is the development and implementation of curricula that are designed to meet the individual and age appropriate characteristics of the child. Issues related to adult/child ratio, parent/school relationships, evaluation procedures, and integrated curriculum

Develop-mentally appropriate practices are based on historical and empirical research.

development are common to all documents. Viewed by skeptics as simply another "educational bandwagon," the recommendations are actually based on historical and empirical research supporting teaching strategies unique for children from birth through age seven. These proposals are coming at the same time that schools are experiencing a surge of reform under the umbrellas of such things as site based management, outcome based education, and school restructuring. Ironically, all of these moves may complement each other and support the creation of quality environments for children.

Developmentally appropriate practices reflect a philosophy that is process based, not product oriented. They require a thorough knowledge and understanding of not only the growth and development of the individual child, but also of the curriculum that is being endorsed by the district. There is no one right way to implement the philosophy. Unique characteristics of the district, the teachers, and the children will all lend themselves to the development of the programs. There are, however, common threads that should be woven throughout any and all of the programs. These include a focus on the individual child that takes into account the chronological and developmental age of the child. Hands on, integrated learning is essential. Adult/child interactions should be of high quality, with close

continued home/school contacts. Evaluations of young children should be sensitive to the learning styles of the child and authentic and meaningful to both the adults and the children involved in the process.[25,26,27]

Piaget's seminal work has enhanced our understanding of how young children learn.

Piaget's seminal work in our understanding of how children learn has fostered and enhanced the education of young children. Since children from about 3 through 7 years of age are thinking in what Piaget describes as the preoperational period, they tend to acquire knowledge in ways that are quite different from those of older children. Many and varied direct sensory experiences with their environment are essential, since they have not developed the abilities to abstract yet. Their world is "here and now" oriented and should include many "hands on" experiences with a variety of materials exploring similarities, differences and uses in many contexts.

The curriculum should emphasize active participation rather than passive approaches. Curriculum which is dominated by worksheets, workbooks, and drill should be minimized. The curriculum and overriding philosophy must reflect a design to help children learn and grow. The "readiness" myth has little place in developmentally appropriate practices. Five-year old minds can deal with rich and complex surroundings when the curriculum is built around their abilities to use and

apply ideas from the immediate environments. The regurgitation of facts is not inherent in a sound kindergarten program. A developmentally appropriate curriculum for the kindergarten does limit itself to being only academic or only socialization in orientation. On the contrary, empirical research suggests that a developmentally appropriate practices approach should include an intellectually stimulating orientation which allows children to interact in both small and large groups as they address a variety of projects which will help them increase their understanding of their own world and strengthen their abilities to observe, experiment and construct and restructure their environment.

There must be opportunities for spontaneous play, listening, communicating, enjoying books, and employing children's natural curiosity in story telling and expanding their knowledge base. Making connections with previous learning requires new and unique approaches in teaching, allowing individual children to learn their own way and at their own rate. Reform in kindergarten education should begin with a comprehensive definition of what children should be able to do, what they should learn and then a system must be designed to achieve those ends. There must be a willingness on the part of educators to reorganize the traditional early childhood curriculum to include more flexibility to effectively meet the varied needs of

Making connections with previous learning is a key in designing curriculum for young children.

students who develop at different rates and have different learning styles and varied backgrounds of experiences. Moving from lock-step-grades in favor of multi-age groupings, developing alternative assessment packages which focus on what children know and employing cooperative learning models should be the centerpiece of child-centered early childhood reform.

Notes

1 Wyoming State Department of Education, Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1891 to 1982, Cheyenne, Wyoming: SA Bristol Company 1892.

2 Lydia O. Strouf, The Development of Kindergarten Programs in Wyoming Public Schools: 1892-1977, Unpublished Masters Thesis of Wyoming, 1978, pp.12,13,16,17.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Wyoming Education Association, Minutes of the Wyoming Meetings, March 19, 1892 to March 31, 1892, pp.25-47.

7 State of Wyoming, Session Laws of the State of Wyoming, Enacted by the Third State Legislation, Convened at Cheyenne on January 8, 1895, Cheyenne, Wyoming, (Daily Sun Publishing House, 1895) pp.100-101.

8 Wyoming State Department of Education, Biennial Report of Superintendent of Pubic Instruction 1912-1918.

9 Ibid.

10 University of Wyoming Bulletin 1946-47.

11 Anonymous, Six Districts Initiate Model Kindergarten, *The Wyoming Educator*, p.1, September, 1976.

12 S. Goffin and D. Steglin 1992. Ed. *Changing Kindergartens*, National Association for the Education of Young Children: Washington, D.C.

13 Walsh, D. 1989. Changes in Kindergarten: Why here? Why now? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 4*, 377-391.

14 R. Hitz and D. Wright 1988, Kindergarten Issues: A Practitioner's Survey. *Principal*, 1988.

15 U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement. February 1993. Profile of Preschool Children's Child Care and Early Education Program Participation.

16 S.J. Meisels. 1987. Uses and Abuses of Developmental Screening and School Readiness Testing. *Young Children*, 42 (2), 4-9.

17 L.A. Shepard and M.L. Smith, Flunking Kindergarten Escalating Curriculum Leaves Many Behind, 1988.

18 E.M. Tomchin and J.C. Impara, Unraveling Teachers Beliefs About Grade Retention. *American Educational Research Journal, 29(1)*, 199-223, 1992.

19 P. Mantzicopoulos and D. Morrison, Kindergarten Retention: Academic and Behavioral Outcomes Through the End of Second Grade. *American Educational Research Journal, 29*, 182-198, 1992.

20 L.A. Shepard and M.L. Smith, Synthesis of Research on School Readiness and Kindergarten Retention. *Educational Leadership*, 77-85, 1986.

21 L.A. Shepard and M.L. Smith, Flunking Kindergarten Escalating Curriculum Leaves Many Behind, 1988.

22 T. Schultz *Right from the Start: The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education*, Alexandria, Va: National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988.

23 In C. Warger Ed. ASCD Early Childhood Education Policy Panel, Analysis of Issues Concerning Public School Involvement in Early Childhood Education, *A Resource Guide to Public School Early Childhood Program*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1988.

24 S. Bredekamp Ed. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*, National Association for the Education of Young Children: Washington, D.C. 1987.

25 B. Spodek, Ed. *Educationally Appropriate Kindergarten Practices*, National Education Association of the United States, 1991.

26 S. Goffin and D. Stegelin Ed. *Changing Kindergartens*, National Association for the Education of Young Children: Washington, D.C. 1992.

27 M. Kostelnik, A. Soderman, and A. Whiven, *Developmentally Appropriate Programs in Early Childhood Education*, Merrill: New York, 1993.